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# St. Mary's Catholic Church,

## Lebanon, Pa.

PAPER READ BEFORE THE

LEBANON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY,

FEBRUARY 19, 1904,

—BY—

### Rev. Adam Christ,

### Lebanon, Pa.

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## St. Mary's Catholic Church.

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It was in the early part of the last century that a few Germans made their way to our present Lebanon County and sought homes for themselves in our virgin forests ; these men were willing to work and work they did. Could they now arise from their graves and behold the results of their labor they would not believe that thrift and industry could produce such fruits, but they would attribute it solely to that mysterious arm which controls and guides the destiny of nations, and in their exultation they would cry out, "How wonderful are the ways of God. Great are His works."

It was about the year 1716 that the nucleus of a small mission was formed in this region. Ground upon which to build a church was donated by a man named Arendorf, who at that time resided about three miles from the present city of Lebanon, in the Northern township. Work was immediately commenced and in a short time the chapel, sufficiently large enough to accommodate all who were then enrolled as members, was completed. The first priest who attended the wants of this little flock was the Very Rev. Louis DeBarth, who in after years was appointed administrator of the Diocese of Philadelphia. His visits were few, owing to the difficulties and hardships encountered in traveling in those days, but we are told that every three months some clergyman passing through would stop and administer the sacraments. After Father DeBarth's appointment as administrator of the Philadelphia Diocese, the spiritual wants of the people were looked after by Father Fitzsimmons.

The little congregation gradually increased ; from time to

time Catholics came from Colebrook and vicinity and worshipped in the little block church. In those days great sacrifices were made by our pious ancestors. It was a common thing for many of them to start on Saturday night and walk 30 or 40 miles in order to receive the consolations of religion within the walls of the old block church. But the old block church now became unfit for religious purposes and the constantly increasing band of Catholics were invited to attend service at the home of a certain Jacob Arnold, who resided in North Lebanon Township.

It might be remarked here that the bones of many of these first Catholics still lie buried in a small plot of ground about one half mile south of the present Kimmerling's Church. This plot of land was given for cemetery purposes by the same man who donated the land upon which the block church was built.

The little band attended services at the Arnold home until the year 1812, Rev. John Bashter caring for their needs. A movement favorable for the erection of a church as near as possible to the centre of a very large circuit in which Catholics were scattered, was noticed among the older members and successfully pushed on by Father Beshter. The ground upon which our Court House now stands was donated by the borough fathers, but this was exchanged for the site upon which St. Mary's is built, being better adapted for church purposes and the spot a more retired one. Great efforts were made by the little flock in preparing the road for the new church. Friends were not wanting who assisted them and gave a hearty encouragement. It was on the 25th of October, 1812, that the cornerstone of the new church was laid by the Rev. Beshter. The weather was fine and hence a great crowd of people, at least they thought so then, came together to witness the ceremony. But now arose a difficulty. What were they to do for the singing part of the service? We are told there were no singers among the flock. This difficulty was soon overcome, for it seems a certain Mrs. Loffman, who acted as house keeper for the priest, supplied the deficiency by



doing all the singing herself. She sang with great spirit the old hymn, "Wann der Herr das haus nicht baut, So arbeiten die vergeblich die daran bauen," words taken from the 126th Psalm. Father Beshter delivered a short discourse, and then the happy little congregation turned towards their homes, thanking God that their efforts had been so far blessed. Father Beshter undertook the arduous task of erecting the church but he did not remain to see it completed. He was transferred to Adams County, Pa. Here it was that 30 years later, on the 4th of January 1842, the good Father died in the 76th year of his age, having passed 40 years as a zealous priest of God in laboring for the salvation of souls.

Work, however, on the Lebanon church was continued and steadily went on until the Spring of 1814, when the little church, which had been consecrated to the Virgin Mother of the Savior, was solemnly dedicated to the service of God by an English priest hailing from Lancaster, whose name we cannot learn. Before the dedication the balance of debt on the church was removed by Herman Arnold, George Zweir, Jacob Aurentz and Conrad Allwein.

The clergymen who occasionally attended to the wants of the new parish were Fathers George Shenfelder, James Commiskey and G. D. Hogar. These priests visited Lebanon about once a month. It is related by way of anecdote how very plain, nay, modest, unassuming the little congregation was. The fashions did not trouble these poor people who would have been scandalized had they noticed in their daughters any innovating in the shape of flowers or feathers. The simple hood, plain and unadorned, covered their modest looks. It has been said that the townpeople would sometimes come to church, simply as they said, to see the fashions; so well were the church folks known for their unpretentious pious ways.

The little congregation steadily increased, as the town advanced in size and enterprize; more hands were needed; hard thorny hands, hands that knew how to work. The Union Canal was to pass through the town, turnpikes were to be made or kept in repair, and many other improvements which

required the aid of the hardy sons of toil. Many Irish and real German families found their way here, and with them came some who needed a watchful eye, and guiding hand, to keep them in the narrow way. Father Charles Kearns was appointed to reside here. He was a tall, robust, powerful man, and it was providential that he was so, for it required a strong arm morally and physically, to correct those who are always to be found in a motley crowd of laborers ready for a frolic. It is related of Father Kearns that he was always ready for any emergency, and that he traveled on foot from Lebanon to Jonestown one day in order to disperse a band of his congregation who had assembled there for a drinking frolic. Father Kearns labored here for a number of years, when he fell sick and was called to his reward in September, 1825. The remains of Father Kearns were disinterred at the time of the erection of our present church, and they were found to be in a fine state of preservation. After his death several pastors officiated in Lebanon. It was with the advent of Father Baumgardner that a movement was set on foot to enlarge the church. This was approved of by the people of Father Baumgardner raising subscriptions among his parishioners, pushed the work to completion. In the latter part of the year 1848 Father Baumgardner was sent to another mission and his place here was taken by Rev. John Levig, O. S. F. From this time on until the appointment of Father A. F. Kuhlman as pastor in 1869, the priests were changed at frequent intervals, not one, we believe, remained over five years. It was under the pastorage of Rev. Antonius Grundner, O. S. B., that our present parochial school system was established. This priest was liked by all classes for his social and genial ways, together with his great knowledge of men and things. Father Grundner was asked and had consented to preach here on the day of the corner stone laying of our present church, but instead of his former parishioners listening to a discourse by him, they were saddened to hear it announced on that day that Father Grundner had died shortly before in Philadelphia.

The old church was for a short time interdicted by the

Bishop, on account of Trustee difficulties, but was again re-opened for divine services by Father Kuhlman on the 8th of September, 1869. Father Kuhlman at once saw the necessity of more church room and began to prepare the way for a new church. A meeting of the youth of both sexes was held on the 10th of November, 1872. From this meeting arose an organization called "Church Fund Association," whose aim was the raising of funds for the erection of a new church. In three years time this Association had, by taking up monthly contributions, gathered \$10,000. It was then that work towards the erection of the new church began, the farewell to the old one was given on Sunday, June 4th, 1876; many were affected even to tears, but the demands of the large congregation had to be supplied. On the 17th of June the last brick of the old church was removed and on the 20th day of the same month ground was broken for the new. The corner stone was laid on the 15th of August, the patronage festival of the congregation. The church was pushed on to completion as rapidly as possible, but it was not until Dec. 15, 1880, that the congregation saw the success of their efforts. It was on this day that, amid great pomp and splendor, Rt. Rev. Shanahan, Bishop of Harrisburg, consecrated to the service of God Lebanon's magnificent structure. It was the intention of Father Kuhlman to fittingly celebrate the first anniversary of the consecration of St. Mary's, but death intervened, and ere the time came for this celebration the good priest, though in the prime, and vigor of life, had been called to his reward. He was a man beloved by all classes and creeds, and his death was universally regretted, and the church of St. Mary's still stands as a monument attesting to all the untiring zeal of Father Kuhlman.

The writer of this paper was appointed pastor of St. Mary's church Nov. 1, 1882. Upon the death of the pastor, Rev. Father Kuhlman, in 1881, I was appointed pastor in charge. Since then, and during my pastorage, the convent and parochial school were built, and the Cornwall church erected, the former in 1884, and the latter in 1886.









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